

Southern Appalachian Creature Feature Podcasts

Ozark Hellbender

Greetings and welcome to the Southern Appalachian Creature Feature.

Once you see a hellbender, you never forget it. Hellbenders are salamanders, but not just any salamanders. They're big salamanders. Growing up to three feet in rare instances, it's fairly easy to come across individuals at least a foot long here in the Southern Appalachians. Despite their size, they're essentially harmless to humans and are part of a healthy stream ecosystem.

There are two types of hellbenders in the United States, the Eastern hellbender, found here in the Southern Appalachians, and the generally smaller Ozark hellbender, found in the Ozark Mountains of Missouri and Arkansas. Numbers of Ozark hellbenders have declined to the point that it's currently being considered for addition to the federal endangered species list.

The Ozark hellbender seems to be coming under assault from a variety of threats.

Impoundments and in-stream gravel mining have eliminated and altered habitat; sediment and chemical contaminants taint the water in the salamander's streams. These challenges are typical of those facing aquatic animals, however, the hellbender also faces a threat from the chytrid fungus, a disease linked to amphibian die-offs around the world. The fungus is known to be fatal to hellbenders in captivity and is found in all of the streams where the Ozark hellbender lives. Additionally, the salamander suffers from an illegal pet trade, with the largest market suspected to be Japan.

For WNCW and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, this is Gary Peeples.